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ABSTRACT

An effective attack on the massive problems of urban education in New York will require maximum cooperation among all school board members, regardless of their location in the State. As agents of the State, all school board members are legally responsible to all citizens of the State. As citizens, board members should be aware that population patterns point to an increasingly crowded and complex future. Cities will be either centers of culture and hope or places of conflict and despair, depending on the contemporary response to urban problems. In this increasingly interdependent society, all board members must share in the responsibility for obtaining "equality of educational opportunity" for children attending urban schools. (JH)

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NON-URBAN SCHOOL BOARDS AND THE PROBLEM OF URBAN EDUCATION*

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Once again it is my privilege to participate in the Annual Convention of the State School Boards Association and I am grateful, as always, for the opportunity of speaking to a group that influences so decisively the quality of education in New York State.

Recognizing 1967 as the year of the dual anniversaries of the Free Public School Act in our State and the establishment of the United States Office of Education, your program deals with the important and significant issues that face us as we review past accomplishments and look ahead to the obligations of the ever-growing task of education.

There are many of these issues I should like to discuss with you but the limits of time, with a full program still to come this evening, force a choice. You may be surprised, disappointed, or even disapproving to know that the issue I have chosen is that of urban education.

The assignment of priorities in education is always a difficult matter, for when you are dealing with the lives of children and young people, every need is urgent, every decision important. But thoughout the history of our schools, there have been periods when great stirrings of social change have created pressures that

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have caused particular issues to stand out from the seething mass of educational problems with an undeniable claim of foremost priority.

Such a period is now upon us, and such an issue is urban education. Substantiation for this claim is all too abundant. Its emergence is not a recent development. For some years perceptive persons, educators and laymen alike, involved in, and aware of, the problems of our cities, have been characterizing them as most urgent and pressing and of a difficulty that will yield only to a massive and concerted attack. But the scale of action thus far engendered has not been equal to the scope of the problem and has had relatively little significant effect.

Now the tragic series of riots, uprising, boycotts and strikes that have plagued American cities in recent years, the mounting evidence of educational failures, unrest and difficulties in slum area schools -- all have brought us to the point where no excuses can justify further postponement of the massive attack on urban problems for which so many have been calling for so long. Some of the key factors involved are these:

-- Sixty percent of the State's school age children are in the city school districts; 46 percent in the six largest cities; 40 percent in New York City.

-- The great size of the population in the cities has resulted in systems of centralized bureaucratic educational control that are remote and too complex to be responsive to neighborhood needs.

— This situation is compounded by the rapid population shifts of recent decades which have resulted in an urban concentration of minority population groups which are blocked by barriers of race and language from full participation in the social, economic, political and educational life of the cities. This condition has nurtured growing distrust of the established order and institutions of education.

-- Cities have a disproportionately high percentage of those most difficult to educate: more than three-fourths of all those children classified as economically "deprived" and educationally "disadvantaged" are in the cities; the school drop out rate in our six largest city school systems is 15% greater than for the rest of the State; the percentage of pupils falling below minimum reading competence is nearly twice that for the rest of the State; and so it goes.

-- The loss of economic strength of the cities, the heavy burden on the tax dollar because of the demands of public safety, welfare, and other city services -- the so-called "municipal over-burden" -- and restriction of state legalities, are straining the cities' capacities to finance the kind and quality of education required.

These facts and figures, striking though they are, give only a suggestion of outline or reality -- they are but the bare bones and can be fully recognized and appreciated only when they are clothed with the substance of human failure, disappointment and tragedy they represent.

I am, of course, aware that comparatively few of you are directly involved in the problems of urban education. But each of you has a responsibility -- not merely that which every citizen must bear, but a special one as a school board member.

Each year, as you know, the Regents sponsor an orientation conference in Albany for new school board members. One of the main objectives of that conference is to stress the dual nature of the role of a school board member.

The legal responsibility for education in our country rests with the states. In New York State a system of local districts has been established to carry out this responsibility. These districts are political entities in themselves and school board members are legally agents of the State, charged with the responsibility for governing the schools of their communities on behalf of the people of the State. On the one hand, a school board member has a responsibility to all the people of the State in his role as an agent of the state; on the other, the responsibility to the citizens of his district over whose schools he has direct

charge. In other words, a school board member cannot think or act solely in terms of local educational obligations.

Furthermore, the duality of his role puts the school board member in a position of partnership with those of us at the state level -- the Regents, the Commissioner, and the members of the State Education Department -- designated by law to carry out the Constitutional mandate. In a very real sense, the local school board member is as much a state official as are Regents, and as such, have an obligation for a concern for the statewide aspects of education and for an understanding of the plans and proposals of the Regents and the Department.

Thus, when the need for intensive attention to problems of urban education is so demandingly obvious, the Regents and I must call upon <u>all</u> school board members to join with us in meeting the need.

In addition to this basic obligation there are many other reasons why the problems of urban education should be of concern to every school board member regardless of his location in the State.

Location no longer has the clearly definitive limitations it once possessed. The distinctions between "rural" and "urban" are not as sharp as they once were. Good roads, radio and television, tremendously increased mobility of population, have blurred these lines of distinction and produced a greater homogeneity among the people than has heretofore existed. Suburbia has spread in great

widening arcs on the periphery of all our cities and towns. Hundreds of thousands of persons live in these suburbs but work and gain there livelihood in our cities. More and more the areas of the state are being drawn together in the closer relationship of a recognition of mutual interests and need.

Good schools everywhere are important for every child as increasingly larger numbers of children do not complete their education in one school system.

The educational difficulties and failures of our cities tend to restrict the progress of education far beyond the boundaries of the cities. Our cities once mirrored the best in education -- and in many specific schools and areas this is still true -- but all too often it is the worst of education that is seen in city schools. Our city schools can be great laboratories for the discovery and generation of new and profitable methods and ideas for the improvement of education. When they are not so, it is not only the city schools that suffer, but education everywhere.

Furthermore, there is a question of justice and fair play involved in considering the obligation of the non-urban school board member for assistance in solving the problems of urban schools. It is not too many years ago that the problems of rural schools occupied the position of prominence now held by those of urban schools. There was great support from cities for the state-aid

policies that encouraged the development of our central schools. Administrators and teachers in city schools served as consultants, and in many other ways assisted in the improvement and broadening of opportunity for children in rural areas. Now there is both the opportunity and the obligation for a return of this favor.

Many more reasons could be cited as justification for asking for the assistance and support of all school board members in attac ing the problems of urban schools, but even the little I have been able to include tonight seems to me to be a clear call for unstinted cooperation.

This cooperation will fall into two general categories -- first, that of state, then of local action.

The emphasis the state is now placing upon city problems is, and will be, the source of many new ideas and plans. These will need wide support. Such matters as integration, teacher recruitment and preparation, district reorganization, and finance will be receiving special attention. Concerning finance, for example, a new concept of state aid will be required to make possible the adaptations necessary for aid that can be directed specifically at the special problems of the cities. The long cherished equalization principle, designed for the days of a predominantly rural society, is proving to be increasingly inadequate, unresponsive and inequitable for a predominantly urban society. This, of course, does not mean abandonment of the equalization principle, but it does

mean adjustments and changes that will make it reflect more accurately the variations for which equalization must be provided.

At the local level, methods of cooperation will vary according to particular situations. Basic, of course, is a willingness and a desire to be of help wherever it can be appropriately and profitably given. Certainly, there will need to be a greater degree of suburban-city cooperation.

In terms of the organization and operation of school boards, there is also an opportunity for service. Our large cities are moving towards more decentralization of school control and management which will often mean the creation of more semi-autonomous "community school boards." Such decentralization plans are already on the move in New York City. These community school boards could benefit greatly from the expertise and experience of long-established school boards, efficient in themselves and strengthened through membership in the State School Boards Association.

We are, I believe, on the threshold of a new era for our urban schools. The combination of an awakened sense of social justice and the unremitting pressure of need will bring results.

The State School Boards Association has long been a leader in all the great surges of constructive development in education in our state. Another such surge is now beginning and I hope that both as individuals and as an association you will once again exert your influential and formative leadership.

Both as citizens, and as school board members, you from town, village or farm share with those in the cities the responsibility for good education in urban schools. Your children and their children will live in an increasingly crowded and complex world where the cities will either be centers of culture and hope or places of conflict and despair, depending upon what you and I do about them. The people of the cities cannot alone solve problems of the magnitude now existing. Furthermore, the health of the cities is a vital factor in the economic, political, social health of state and nation.

In conclusion, may I say once again that as far as the Regents and the State Education Department are concerned, no other area of our responsibility is receiving more intensive attention that that of urban education. As we seek to devise the best methods of carrying out the State's responsibility to the million and a half children whose "equality of educational opportunity" must be found in the schools of our cities, we ask your assistance and support, both as school board members with a legal responsibility for state-wide education and as persons dedicated to the goal of good education for all the children of the state wherever they may live. An enthusiastic and dedicated acceptance of this dimension of your responsibility will go far in making 1967 a year to be well-remembered as the beginning of a new and brighter era for the children of our cities.